

Britain's choice

Voters deserve a more radical vision than the timid and uninspiring policies all parties have put forward so far.



WHATEVER they tell you in school, not all elections matter equally. Sometimes the government isn't in any danger of losing its grip; sometimes no one would notice if it did. The British general election on May 6th is not one of those. It does matter, and not just because the party in power for the past 13 years is more likely than not to lose.

It matters domestically because Britain, after a decade and a half of strong, steady growth, has been knocked off track by savage recession and turmoil in the financial world it once dominated. Its public finances are in an almighty mess, its budget deficit at a post-war high of 11.8% of GDP. Britain has lost its political bearings too. The New Labour model, which aimed at social justice paid for by the fruits of more or less free-market capitalism, ran out of puff roughly when the money did. The state has grown, personal freedom has shrunk, and it is not clear that people are much the better for it.

The election matters outside Britain as well. Britain's is the single most reliable voice for open markets, inside and outside the European Union. It has been ready to act on behalf of others, not just at gunpoint in Sierra Leone or Iraq or Afghanistan, but also in spearheading aid for the world's poorest. When banks around the globe were going belly-up, Britain came up with answers fastest, and it must be an important part of worldwide re-regulation. Some things will be the same whoever wins. Free trade and open markets, for example, are in the DNA of this island nation. But others will not. It is hard to have influence in Europe if you do not have allies there; and, with money tight at home, some will be more inclined to spray it around the world than others.

Change, but to what precisely?

All this argues for deep thinking and radicalism. But 2010 does not feel like 1979, when the Conservatives under Margaret Thatcher swept to power, bashed the unions and privatised state industries. Nor does it evoke 1997, when Tony Blair's New Labour jettisoned socialism and espoused the Third Way.

This time Labour, under Gordon Brown, the Conservatives, led by David Cameron, and the Liberal Democrats, under Nick Clegg, have been so busy blaming each other for what went wrong that there is little talk of what needs to happen if things are to go right. Missing in electoral action is any compelling view of what Britain should aim to be when it emerges from what will inevitably be a long, wrenching fiscal workout: that it is, or could be, a country which lives within its means, pays the state to do what it can do effectively and no more, stops subsidising failure through sloppy, bloated benefits rolls and educates its young to hold down serious jobs in an economy in which the government stops hogging the capital markets, complicating the tax code and heaping up regulation.

The biggest issue in this campaign is getting the public finances under control without snuffing out economic recovery. Mr Brown argues that he brought Britain through recession, and that the risk of relapse is great enough that no change of management, or early wielding of the fiscal axe, can safely be contemplated. Mr Cameron blames Mr Brown for much of the present fiscal mess, which he says he will deal with more effectively. The Lib Dems would wait until recovery is entrenched, like Labour, and then slice at spending.

But a pre-electoral discretion has overwhelmed all three. The Tories lost ground in the polls after vowing fiscal austerity last autumn, and are now talking more about tax cuts than spending cuts. Nobody is saying much about how they would fix things. That needs to change, and politicians need to explain how cuts could improve government, not cripple it.

The second issue is public services. Both main parties have pledged to maintain spending on the National Health Service (NHS), at least for the next few years. That is the wrong answer to the wrong question. How much is spent matters less than how it is spent. Mr Blair made efforts to introduce competition and choice into public-service delivery, but Mr Brown was never a fan. The dearth of money now must put reform front and centre. The Tories have some plausible ideas about health care and even better ones about freeing schools from local authorities. It would be good to hear more from both parties.

The third issue is, broadly, Britain's place in the world. There are hard choices to make. Even before the crisis there was not enough money for all the kit the armed forces thought necessary to respond to a range of unknowable future threats. So far politicians have dodged questions about priorities by pointing to the strategic defence review scheduled for after the election. No party deserves power unless it has detailed the principles with which it would approach that review.

Too close to call

Until a few weeks ago, the outcome of this election seemed obvious. The worst recession since the war, an unpopular prime minister, fatigue with a party too long in power and a fresh-faced Tory leader who hugged hoodies rather than deporting migrants all conspired to give the Conservatives a lead reliably in the double digits. But Labour's prospects have recovered a bit along with the economy and Mr Cameron has failed to eradicate a deep historical hostility to his party. The electoral system is biased against the Tories anyway (see article), support for smaller parties is growing and voters—who are, after all, choosing constituency MPs rather than a prime minister directly—have all sorts of reasons, from pot-holes to fiddled expenses, to defy nationwide predictions. It may be that the polls, for the first time since 1974, produce no outright winner.

Whatever the outcome, some sort of history will be made next month. Mr Cameron would be the youngest prime minister since the 19th century. Mr Brown's fightback from the political graveyard would be epic. The first hung parliament in almost four decades would mean a new sort of politics for Britain. It is far from clear which the country will end up with. But one thing is sure: bigger and bolder thoughts are needed.

To help voters make up their minds, this issue contains a 20-page briefing on personality, policy and psephology. We will say who we think should win a week before the election.

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